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AUTHOR	Davis, Patricia W.; Karr-Kidwell, PJ
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ABSTRACT

Parental and community involvement in Title I schools is limited by occurrence and the absence of positive motivation. When parents are involved in the life of a school, children receive the message that education is important and the school is a vital commodity. With this involvement, a culture is developed that encompasses the children, neighborhood, and community. The purpose of this paper was to create a field-research project to enable Title I administrators in one Texas school district to develop a community-relations program. The purpose of this field research was to identify areas of concern that might emerge during the implementation of a community-involvement program. Strategies were developed based on historical data, demographic and social integration, and inherent school characteristics. For the collection of needed data for this study, a survey was designed and administered to a representative number from the community surrounding one particular elementary school. (Survey results appear in an appendix). Careful study of the neighborhood survey shows that many community residents have a positive attitude toward the school. As a result, school leaders have a research-based plan to reach, involve, and accept the surrounding community in a positive manner. (Contains 43 references.) (Author/WFA)

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School Leaders and Community: Research and a Plan for Collaboration.

Patricia W. Davis
P. J. Karr-Kidwell

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SCHOOL LEADERS AND COMMUNITY:

RESEARCH AND A PLAN FOR COLLABORATION

Patricia W. Davis

Arlington I.S.D.

Kindergarten Teacher

Masters, Texas Woman's University

PJ Karr-Kidwell, Ph.D

Professor, Educational Administration

College of Professional Education

Texas Woman's University

EA 032 406

Introduction

Imagine an older neighborhood with towering trees and neat, tidy yards. The houses are small, but well constructed with brick. Indeed, all these people ever wanted was a brick house. The people who live here bought into the American dream when they figured out a way to purchase these houses over 35 years ago. Most residents are nearing retirement and most envy those who are already retired. Their neighborhood and houses are an investment for the future. Something has happened to bring their property values down and to put their comfort level into question. Their peace has been disturbed and they are looking for someone to blame (Bagin, 1999; Centrie, Fine, Roberts, & Weiss, 2000; Forman & Lewis, 2002).

Review of Related Literature

People want peace, quiet, good health, and safety. They did not ask for crime. They did not ask for noise. They did not ask for traffic. By all means, they did not ask for schools, children, and parents to invade their neighborhood sanctuary (Hoyle, 2001). They did not ask for the four large apartment complexes that were built 15 years ago near the neighborhood. The people were opposed at first. They were worried that the apartments would be unsightly, loud, and disturbing (Plucker, 2000). However, the apartments exuded quality. Everything was fine until the economy bottomed out and the apartment owners decided to ask the government for help. The high quality apartments became government subsidized. There was low rent and there were many children. There was increased traffic, sirens in the middle of the night, and drug busts. There was fear.

The school was to blame, of course. This was a public relations nightmare for the school leaders. The school was at the heart of the neighborhood (Centrie et al., 2000; Forman & Lewis, 2002; Hoyle, 2001; Lee, 2003).

School culture is a powerful, underlying force that shapes the attitudes, activities, and interactions of the school community and neighborhood. In simpler terms, culture is the way things are done and how people relate to each other (Marriot, 2001). A favorable cultural community is evidenced in school pride, open communication, productivity, cooperation, widespread involvement, a sense of cohesiveness, and acts of caring and sharing (Barth, 2002; Brandt, 1998). Studies of community, however, typically examine groups that are already formed (Burnette, 2002). The questions are whether or not administrators forge the bonds of community, struggle to maintain them, work through the conflicts of social relationships and eventually form the structures needed to sustain them over time. The administrator needs to understand these processes before attempting to create a school community (Grossman, 2001).

Sociological research on schooling has recently centered on this relationship of the school and the community. The connection between the two is formative and reciprocal. This relationship between school and community involves political, institutional and network dimensions (Carroll & Carroll, 2001). Schools are embedded in local ecological communities and also are embedded in larger organizational communities. The organizational communities involve the state regulating agency, the school board, teacher associations, and training organizations (Meyer, 1994). Nonetheless, the role of the surrounding community is critical to the success of the school (Plucker, 2000).

Communities serve as a catalyst for reform and improvement in school practices (Carroll & Carroll, 2001).

Early educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Horace Mann saw school practices as emerging from the democratic nature of American communities; schools were likewise considered necessary to develop the enlightened and rational citizenry that communities in a democracy depended upon (Arum, 2000). "The realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration makes a democratic community have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87).

In the mid 1930s, sociological studies examined the inherent tension between community influence and the effective organization of educational practice. Communities often imposed antiquated sets of moral standards constraining both the personal and institutional behaviors of school personnel (Waller, 1937). Research on education prior to World War II generally indicated that communities influenced school practices primarily through formal democratic processes or through the informal pressures of public opinion and participatory involvement (Arum, 2000).

In the 1950s and 1960s, functionalist accounts of schooling emerged that served to change the relationship between schools and communities. Functionalist interpretations of education provided arguments that school practices mirrored the needs of a larger society. It was stated that school organizations changed to reflect existing and emerging economic conditions (Durkheim, 1977). Social scientists came to see American schools as having a uniform character that was separate from conditions in local communities. Instead, schools responded to the needs of a larger social system, economic structure or

ruling class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Local communities were implicitly assumed to be inconsequential in the United States (Carnoy & Levin, 1992).

During the 1970s, research reflected that schools did not significantly vary as a result of community setting and institutionalists argued that schools had their own organizational culture and were only "loosely coupled" to other organizations in the environment (Meyer, 1977). At the end of the 1970s, sociologists summarized that public school variation in the United Stated was minimal. The community surrounding schools was deemed insignificant (Karabel, 1977).

The indicators suggesting insignificance were defined by James Coleman's (1960) work on social capital. This work identified a focus on the structural organization of individual relationships within communities and how these relationships could affect educational processes. In 1988, it was argued that student behaviors and actions were more in alignment with socially productive adult norms when interpersonal and intergenerational closure existed between school and communities. When this intergenerational closure was weaker, students had more opportunity to develop peer cultures with distinctive values and norms often antagonistic to acceptable community adult norms (Coleman, 1988). Coleman found that interaction between students and the surrounding neighborhood was socially, behaviorally, and academically productive (Arum, 2000).

During this same period, sociologist John Meyer found that organizational environments tended to produce a common, but distinct set of organizational forms. School communities were described as being defined by a school's individual environment as opposed to a global school environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For

instance, a school could flourish in the midst of poverty, or succumb to the ravages of poverty, depending on the environment of the school and the surrounding community. Societal changes redefined the concept of community and organizations within that community (Centrie et al., 2000). As the 1990s approached, technology emerged in triumph, individual mobility increased, female labor market participation sky rocketed, and traditional forms of neighborhood organization were in erosion. Decline was noted in voter registration, union membership, church-related groups, voluntary community civic organizations, and fraternal groups. Such decline in neighborhood activities often paralleled changes in the organizational dynamics of a school. Parent-teacher association involvement and school volunteer participation were also reduced (Arum, 1997; Forman & Lewis, 2002). Demographic specifics and involvement of the neighborhood adjacent to a school can affect educational outcome, individual-level attainment, personal attitude and delinquency (Eisner, 2002; Vogler & Kennedy, 2003).

Much of the contemporary research on neighborhood effects has focused on neighborhood influences that can produce variation in educational potential (Gebhart, 1997; George, 2002; Wherry, 2002). Scholars at the University of Chicago developed a focus on how isolation of ethnic neighborhoods produced less social integration and increased rates of social disorder, delinquency, and crime (Bulmer, 1984). The Panel Study of Income Dynamics examined an association between the likelihood of dropping out of school and income levels, occupational category, and marital status of neighborhood poverty. Researchers have identified the effects of attending schools with socially disadvantaged and vulnerable students on test scores (Arum 2000; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Willms, 2002) and the increased risk of continuing poverty

(Arum, 2000; Fischer, 1996; Lee, 2003). In addition, it has been determined that the social and cultural competencies of neighborhood structure vary in both how parents interact with schools and how schools respond to community pressure and need (Lareau, 1987; Wells, 1997).

Increased parental and community involvement is a key component in the development of school campus plans for improvement. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence cited the active participation of parents and the surrounding neighborhood as a primary element in improving schools (Smock & McCormick, 1995). Empirical study and commentary that focus on education often point to the importance of parental involvement in a child's education (Ginsberg & Johnson, 1998). For example, in a study by Sue Marx Smock and Shanon M. McCormick (1995), two dimensions of parental involvement were studied. These were parent-child interaction and parent-staff interaction. Each of these dimensions was examined by measuring a single activity of parent involvement. Frequency of parent involvement was measured through parents' reported attendance at a variety of school meetings. It was noted that the need to work, care for the basic necessities of running a household, plus the stress of poverty can turn community involvement with a nearby school into a clearly optional activity. Both time and energy are often scarce in an inner city household. Urban families living in poverty have small amounts of discretionary time and discretionary energy. Involvement in a child's school can be viewed as an inherently negative force (McCormick & Smock, 1995).

Turning a negative force into a positive force should be at the center of a school's value system. School leaders should strive for quality interaction and service to the

students, the parents, and the neighborhood (Clement, 2002). The most promising partnerships between schools and the surrounding community extended beyond mere cooperation to include meetings on curriculum development, assessment studies, and school development plans. In connecting and understanding mutual goals, schools and communities can become intertwined. Students and adults inside and outside of a school can use their resources to strengthen learning (McLaughlin, 2001). Students and adults can use their resources to strengthen positive attitudes about education. Students and adults can use their resources to strengthen and transform the community. Community involvement can be a cornerstone of school success and eradication of negativity (Barth, 2002; Bagin, 1999; Brandt, 1998). School personnel cannot control the socioeconomic status of the student, individual variables for learning, or the demographics of the neighborhood. School personnel are able to control the culture of the school and the cohesiveness with the surrounding neighborhood (DuFour, 2002).

Cohesive partnerships with families and communities are an important strategy for school reform. Substantial engagement of home and community is likely to increase the chances of school success (Brandt, 1998; Davies, 2000). These partnerships are not a substitute for well-trained teachers and administrators; diverse teaching techniques; commitment to high standards; continuous assessment; and safe, well-managed schools. However, partnerships can be a force for stability in an economically disadvantaged community (Brandt, 1998). Strong leadership from the administrative staff is critical to partnership success between a school and the surrounding community.

According to the Institute for Responsive Education, certain recommendations

should be part of an administrator's public relations program (Davies, 2002). The recommendations are as follows: (1) Administrators must bridge the traditional separation of schools from the families and communities that they serve. Connections must be made between learning in the classroom and learning in the community. Trust must be built (2) Democratic principles must be recognized and the necessary elements include mediation, negotiation, compromise, respect, and tolerance of differences (3) Administrators mush reach out to the community through parent centers, after-school programs, summer programs, social activities, health services, and positive communication (4) Administrators need to encourage and educate parents to be able to foster their children's health and socially productive behavior and (5) Empower parents and community members with reasonable opportunities for choice. Low income and minority parents may not be in the normal information loops. They need the opportunity to be able to make informed choices.

These types of partnerships between schools and communities will thrive if facilitated by empowerment, responsibility, respect, and hospitality. In this way, positive interaction becomes a tradition between two engaged entities. Schools and surrounding neighborhoods are linked in a cooperative spirit (Davies, 2002).

The school is at the heart of the neighborhood. The school personnel are able to build a community of learners including children, parents, and older adults. The school personnel can build a positive culture cultivated by community involvement where victories are created and successes are celebrated. The school personnel make the difference (Barth, 2002; Morrill, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Parental and community involvement in Title I schools is limited by occurrence and limited by the absence of positive motivation (Arum, 2000). However, when parents are involved in the life of a school, children receive the message that education is important and that the school is a vital commodity (Wherry, 2002). When community leaders are involved in the life of a school, children receive the message that the school is viewed as a positive component of their immediate environment (Barth, 2002). When neighborhood families are involved in the life of a school, children receive the message that the school is a collaboration of ethnicity, varied age groups, differing knowledge levels, and amiable relationships (Lee, 2003; McLaughlin, 2001; Wherry, 2002).

With this involvement, a culture is developed that encompasses the children, neighborhood, and community (Barth, 2002). The pathway to involvement must be accessed through substantive partnerships and the connection of mutual goals. In order to meet the challenges of distinct poverty, educational reforms, and achievement expectations, Title I schools must focus on connecting with parents, the neighborhood and community (Arum, 2000; Brandt, 1998; Fashola & Slavin, 1998).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to create a field research project to enable Arlington ISD Title I administrators to develop a community relations program. Strategies were developed based on historical data, demographic and social integration, and inherent

school characteristics. As a result, school leaders have a research-based plan to reach, involve, and accept the surrounding community in a positive manner.

Procedures

Accountability is mentioned at staff development seminars, faculty meetings, and curriculum presentations as the current directive for educators and administrators to follow. Accountability is most often related to testing programs and the preparation for these testing programs. Accountability is taking responsibility for the outcome and providing strong leadership to reach that outcome. Accountability is the means for a school to promote, display, and reach a higher set of standards.

Accountability at a Title I school involves more than just the promotion of high standards. Accountability also involves constructing a campus improvement plan that designates procedures for educating and informing the parents, guardians, and community on school procedures and expectations. At Morton Elementary School in the Arlington ISD, the site-based management committee noted the needs of the entire family of learners including parents, guardians, and students. The question remained as to how to implement providing for such needs, as well as how to turn reticent parents into active school participants.

Historically, school participation by family members at Morton Elementary was low to barely existent. Participation by community leaders and older neighborhood residents was lacking. The perception appeared to be that the school was an island unto itself. This island was to be accountable for the success and failure of the neighborhood's children. Unfortunately, studies show that economically disadvantaged children are more likely to

fail high-stakes achievement tests than children from more affluent communities. There is indeed a gap between those who have and those who have not. The move toward high standards and accountability can widen that gap. Title I schools have shown that the gap can be narrowed when administrators, teachers, students, and community members work together to form a partnership. This involves building a network of responsible participants who maintain a positive attitude and demeanor toward the school.

The purpose of this field research project was to identify areas of concern that might emerge during the implementation of a community involvement program. Once identified, these areas of concern were used in the preparation of a campus improvement plan that would more closely involve and include parents and community members.

For the collection of needed data for this study, a survey was designed. This survey was administered to a representative number (N=26) from the community surrounding Morton Elementary School. The survey was only distributed to residents who lived in the attendance zone for Morton. These community members included families with school-age children from apartment complexes and retired couples who had lived in the neighborhood in single family residences for over 25 years. Survey questions included statements and responses relating to volunteers, safety issues, curriculum development, diversity, and community. Each survey was answered by the participant marking a response of strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, or strongly disagree. An area for additional comments was made available. After the surveys were completed, results were compiled and used to enhance the portion of the campus improvement plan relating to community involvement.

Results

There were 26 surveys completed and returned from the neighborhood surrounding Morton Elementary School. Surveys were only distributed to residents who lived in the attendance zone for Morton. These surveys were completed by families with children enrolled at Morton, as well as retired couples who had lived in the neighborhood for over 25 years. These families also included single parent homes and homes with multiple families living together, as well as homes with grandparents raising grandchildren. A similar survey will be administered during a January, 2003 staff development day to faculty members including administrators, teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff. A series of short interviews/discussions with faculty members will be held before the January survey is administered. Results from the neighborhood survey will enhance the faculty survey and interviews, as well be a catalyst for discussion in upcoming site-based management meetings.

Examining the neighborhood responses concerning volunteers, 15.38% strongly agreed, 26.92% agreed, 19.23% had no opinion, 23.07% disagreed, and 15.38% strongly disagreed. Of the respondents, 53.84% strongly agreed that Morton Elementary had a diverse student population with 15.38% in agreement, 7.69% with no opinion, 19.23% in disagreement, and 3.84% in strong disagreement. Responses concerning the Parent-Teacher Association at Morton yielded only 11.53% in strong agreement that the organization existed and 38.46 in agreement. On the other hand, 7.69% had no opinion about the PTA and 34.61% disagreed about the group's existence and 7.69% strongly disagreed (See Appendix A).

Question #4 dealt with the welcoming feeling exuded at Morton Elementary. Community members strongly agreed at 3.84% that they felt welcome at the school. Of the remaining respondents, 34.61% agreed, 15.38% had no opinion, 30.76% disagreed, and 15.38% strongly disagreed. The next question dealt with the school and the neighborhood working together for a better community. Percentages were as follows: 46.15% strongly agreed, 23.07% agreed, 3.84% had no opinion, 15.38% disagreed, and 11.53% strongly disagreed. On the next question, community members were asked if they would enjoy tutoring struggling readers at Morton Elementary. To this question, 3.84% strongly agreed, 11.53% agreed, 26.92% had no opinion, 38.46% disagreed, and 19.23% strongly disagreed (See Appendix A).

The next two questions addressed the issue of safety in the neighborhood and at the school. The surveys reflected that 7.69% strongly agreed and 7.69% agreed that they felt safe in the neighborhood. Of the remaining surveys, 11.53 had no opinion, 57.69% disagreed and 15.38% strongly disagreed. Concerning the issue of safety and security at Morton Elementary, the strongest numbers were in agreement about the safe environment. The surveys showed that 30.76% strongly agreed, 42.30% agreed, 7.69% had no opinion, 15.30 disagreed, and 3.84 strongly disagreed (See Appendix A).

Curriculum development was the subject of the next question and only 3.84% strongly agreed that they would serve on such a committee at the school. Of the remaining surveys, 11.53% agreed, 15.38 had no opinion, 46.15% disagreed, and 23.07% strongly disagreed. On question #10, a percentage tie was found among those who agreed and disagreed regarding the school's positive influence on the neighborhood. The results were

as follows: 11.53% strongly agreed, 34.61% agreed, 7.69% had no opinion, 34.61% disagreed, and 11.53% strongly disagreed (See Appendix A).

The next question dealt with community members having the ability to enhance academics at Morton Elementary School. A strong 38.46% were in disagreement with the question and 7.69% were in strong disagreement. Of the remaining surveys, 7.69% strongly agreed, 23.07% agreed, and 23.07% had no opinion. The last question brought up the idea of parents and students working together with teachers to help school personnel to reach higher goals. The answers were as follows: 26.92% strongly agreed, 34.61% agreed, 19.23% had no opinion, 11.53% disagreed, and 7.69% strongly disagreed (See Appendix A). No comments were added on any of the surveys.

Conclusions

Careful study of the neighborhood survey shows that many community residents have a positive attitude towards Morton Elementary School in regards to safety and security. However, a large majority do not feel safe in their own personal domain. They do not feel safe in the place that should give them the most security. Fear exists where there is even the shadow of danger. Fear exists where there is even the shadow of adversity. Adversity and danger equal an atmosphere of reclusive behavior. Reclusive behavior is evident in the halls of Morton Elementary. There are few parents in the halls of Morton Elementary, few parents at PTA meetings, and few parents at scheduled conferences.

Parents are needed at Morton Elementary and Morton Elementary is needed in the community. Community residents are needed at Morton Elementary. Survey results show that residents neither feel overwhelmingly welcome nor overwhelmingly unwelcome at

Morton Elementary. Since almost 70% of respondents answered that the school and the neighborhood should work together for a better community, the opportunity surely exists to open the doors to Morton. The opportunity exists to open the doors to personal growth, cohesiveness, involvement, and academic collaboration.

Such collaboration is a step towards educational goal attainments for the children, parents, teachers, and administrators as well as the neighborhood residents. Personal goal attainments in varied areas would also reap the benefits of community collaboration. It is said that community is a gathering together of ideas, beliefs, fears, friendships, strategies, disagreements, progress, work, love, distaste, protection and acquisition. Community collaboration between Morton Elementary and the surrounding neighborhood is a step towards success. Success equates successful students, teachers, neighbors, and parents. Success begins with positive involvement.

Involvement begins with the teachers and administrators. Teachers and administrators must work positively with parents and the community. Teachers are the connection between the classroom and the home and the community. Perhaps the parents do not know how to complete math problems. Perhaps the parents do not know how to set limits for themselves, much less for their children. Perhaps parents do not know how to monitor and how to maintain. Teachers can be their best ally. Teachers can bring the parents into the classroom. Teachers are a key to involvement.

Involvement begins with respect. The neighborhood around Morton Elementary is diverse. There are different ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, religious beliefs, and lifestyles. Where there is difference, there is conflict. A measure of conflict can be contained with respect. Any partnership needs compromise, negotiation, and mediation.

A partnership between a school and a community needs sharing concerns, sharing differences, and sharing similarities. Cynics may say respect is too urbane, too token. Cynics have not seen how respect can transform involvement in a school such as Morton Elementary.

Involvement means each party finding a way to meet in the middle. Involvement means reaching out to people. Involvement means inviting the people to join in and be recognized. These are people who have shown that they live in fear. These people need an atmosphere of fun. They need an atmosphere of acceptance. They need friendly communication. They need a link to social services and health services. They need a place to feel welcomed.

Morton Elementary School needs to display a warm welcome mat to the parents and to the neighborhood. Schools are rarely much better than their neighborhoods. On the other hand, neighborhoods are rarely able to remain stable without good schools. Mutual respect and responsibility are concrete needs. Linking schools and neighborhoods requires coordination and provisions for sharing. Morton Elementary School can offer computer labs, gyms, meeting areas, playgrounds, language classes, and a place to engage in pursuits virtually free of fear.

Morton Elementary School can offer security, cohesive companionship, cultural awareness, hospitality, and the powerful gift of education. Education begins with the children at Morton Elementary School and extends to the parents, grandparents, and neighbors. Education begins with a partnership and extends to a collectively bright future.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Student Survey Regarding School-Community Partnerships

Morton Elementary School Neighbors: I am conducting research on school and community partnerships as part of a field research project for Texas Woman's University in Denton, TX. I would appreciate your playing a key role in this study by completing this form. No names are required as your responses are strictly confidential. Thank you for your time.

Patricia W. Davis/Kindergarten Team Leader/Morton Elementary

Please answer the following questions by circling ONE number.

1=Strongly Agree 2=Agree 3=No Opinion 4=Disagree 5=Strongly Disagree

1.	Volunteers are welcomed at Morton Elementary.	15.38	26.92	19.23	23.07	15.38
2.	Morton Elementary has a diverse student population.	53.84	15.38	7.69	19.23	3.84
3.	There is a Parent-Teacher Association at Morton.	11.53	38.46	7.69	34.61	7.69
4.	I would feel welcomed at Morton.	3.84	34.61	15.38	30.76	15.38
5.	The school and the neighborhood should work together for a better community.	46.15	23.07	3.84	15.38	11.53
6.	I would enjoy tutoring struggling readers at Morton Elementary.	3.84	11.53	26.92	38.46	19.23
7.	I feel safe in my neighborhood.	7.69	7.69	11.53	57.69	15.38
8.	I feel that Morton Elementary is a safe and secure school.	30.76	42.30	7.69	15.30	3.84
9.	I would serve on a curriculum development committee at Morton.	3.84	11.53	15.38	46.15	23.07
10.	Morton Elementary has a positive influence on our neighborhood.	11.53	34.61	7.69	34.61	11.53
11.	As a community member, I have the ability to enhance academics at Morton.	7.69	23.07	23.07	38.46	7.69
12.	Parents and students working together with teachers can help school personnel reach higher goals.	26.92	34.61	19.23	11.53	7.69

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PJ Karr-Kidwell

PJ Karr-Kidwell, Ph.D.
Professor, College of Professional Education
Educational Administration, Box 425769
Texas Woman's University
Denton, TX 76204-5769 (940) 898-2241 Dept.
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Organization/Address: Texas Woman's Univ., College of Professional Educ., Educ. Admin., P.O. Box 425769, Denton, TX 76204-5769	Telephone: (940) 898-2246 FAX: (940) 898-2209
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